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ABSTRACT

The job of teachers of composition is to teach students how to write, and what they teach them to write is the school essay. Yet, if they stop to see the school essay for what it really is, they will discover that for all their humanistic claims of wanting to give students voices, the genre is one that actually works to exclude many of these voices. Composition teachers need to examine the origin of the school essay, which lies in poetry. Although they use a different vocabulary, rhetoric and composition theorists and the Language poets share many of the same concerns about reading and writing as it is being used in the United States today. Even though the school essay is a completely artificial form of writing, it has come to represent intelligence and is what is demanded of college students. Often, when nonmainstream students are unable to immediately reproduce it, they are made to feel stupid, do poorly in their college writing courses, or even drop out of college. Both rhetoric and composition theorists and the Language poets contend that full consciousness for any writer is further hindered by the various discourse systems and ideologies under which writers are operating. The only way for composition teachers to change the language is to change the genre of the school essay, or at least expand it. They must refuse to accept only the writing that reproduces the dominant discourse. Only then can they expand their definitions of literacy. (Contains 15 references.) (CR)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

ED 426 416

Rewriting the Social Body: What English Composition Programs Can Learn With the Language Poets

by: Jennifer Beech

As teachers of composition, our job is to teach our students how to write, and what we teach them to write is the school essay. Because we want our students to learn, we are constantly researching new and better ways to teach this genre. However, as Shirley Brice Heath points out, in all this effort to find better pedagogical methods, there has been too little examination of the genre itself (107). In fact, if we stop to see the school essay for what it really is, we discover that for all our humanistic claims of wanting to give our students voices, the genre is one that actually works to exclude many of those voices. This exclusion is no accident. Essayist literacy has come to be used as a measure of intelligence, and college composition teachers have become the gatekeepers of the academy, deeming those who can produce a certain type of writing college material while excluding those who cannot.

Since many of us do not wish to fill this role of gatekeeping, we need to examine the origin of the school essay, which, as Heath explains, lies in poetry. After having done that, we may want to turn to a group of postmodern poets, the Language poets, to examine how our concerns about the use of language to include and exclude groups of people run along similar lines. Although we often use a different vocabulary,

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rhetoric and composition theorists and the Language poets share many of the same concerns about reading and writing as it is being used in the United States today. By exploring our common concerns, we can expand our definitions of what literacy can mean within and outside of the academy.

In her essay "Rethinking the Sense of the Past: The Essay as Legacy of the Epigram," Heath traces changes that the genre of the epigram has undergone since its initial Greek version. Originally, the epigram was a short poem delivered orally by a member of the lower class as a critical comment on the upper or ruling classes. Heath explains that in the first century, the Latin epigrammist Marcus Valerius Martialis expanded the genre to include exposition and conclusion (108-110). Later, Ben Johnson, attempting a classical revival of the epigram for didactic purposes, expanded the form to include exposition, transition, and conclusion (110-11). According to Heath, "The first direct connection between epigrams and essays came in 1597 when Francis Bacon's first *Essays* appeared" (112). These were basically epigrams based on empirical reasoning, touching on such subjects as human society and politics. By the seventeenth century, Bacon's "generic extension of epigram into essay" (112) had become the dominant school mode of writing. Sadly, as Heath adds, "Lost were its oral primacy among those often marginal to society's rich and powerful..." (113).

Examining the current form of the school essay, we see that today, more than ever, it works to exclude many voices that need to be heard. Heath explains:

> But as the rules of its presentation and the equation of its organization with processes of orderly thinking became more and more firmly imposed, it excluded those whose patterns of social organization, habits of making decisions, and ways of arguing were collaborative and encompassing of nonabsolute truths or final points. (116)

It is this system of exclusion that too many people who claim to be concerned with literacy ignore. As Linda Brodkey argues, all definitions of literacy (including essayist literacy) are based on tropes of inclusion/exclusion and us/them, projecting "both a *literate self* and an *illiterate other*" (Brodkey 161). At stake in allowing for other ways of writing and reading are positions of power and prestige, positions that many are not willing to share with those marginalized in our society. Lillian Bridwell-Bowles asserts, "Standard Written English, with its roots in prestige dialects, does not allow our class roots to show..." (359). Even though the school essay is a completely artificial form of writing, it has come to represent intelligence and is, thus, what is demanded of college students. Often, when nonmainstream students are unable to immediately reproduce it, they are made to feel stupid, do poorly in their college writing courses, or even drop out of college.

As other theorists, such as David Bartholomae, have recognized, there is nothing "natural" about the school essay. It is not based on a "natural" voice or form. He explains that college writing bears no relationship to students' primary discourses and that being able to take on an academic voice is easier for some than for others: "I think that all writers, in order to write, must imagine for themselves the privilege of being 'insiders'-- that is, of being both inside an established and powerful discourse, and of being granted a special right to speak" (277). For those marginal students whose voices have been silenced most of their lives, we must understand that they often do not feel authorized to speak and that what they have to say comes out of a different context than that of mainstream students. Describing the development of essayist literacy, David Olson recognizes it as "a distinctly academic brand of literacy that results from mastering the "'schooled' language of written texts'" (qtd. in Trachsel 6). Mary Trachsel points out that essayist literacy demands that students practically divorce themselves from their own socially constructed realities (6-7). Writing for college forces students, as Bartholomae explains, "...to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse..." (273). More often than not, it is the dominant discourse that masters the students, rather than the other way around. *Mastery* is the key term because the school essay requires that students take on a white male authoritarian voice. Or, to use the vocabulary of the Language poets, the students

must be *absorbed* by academic discourse.

In his verse essay "Artifice of Absorption," Language poet Charles Bernstein defines absorption as follows:

> By *absorption* I mean engrossing, engulfing completely...
> mesmerizing, hypnotic, total, riveting,
> enthralling: belief, conviction, silence.(*Poetics* 29)

The Language poets want to warn their readers of the ways that language is used to silence us by telling us who we are. For example, if our students are absorbed by academic discourse, then they buy into it as a measure of intelligence. When they fail to reproduce it, they buy into the notion of themselves as inadequate. When they are able to abandon their own primary discourses and ways of making meaning for schooled ways, they have been absorbed to the point of being lulled into unconsciousness. When absorbed by any discourse, the Language poets would argue, people cease to have the capacity to critically read texts and to think for themselves. According to Bernstein,

> ...In order for a
> sociohistorical reading to be possible, absorption of the poem's own ideological imaginary must be blocked; the refusal of absorption is a prerequisite to understanding (in the literal sense of standing *under* rather than inside).... (*Poetics* 21)

Although Bernstein's poem "Of Time and the Line" speaks of the danger of poets being absorbed into the dominant ways of writing poetry, the following lines can also serve as a general caution about the possibility of academic discourse to work to the inclusion and exclusion of certain readers and writers:

> ...The prestige
> of the iambic line has recently
> suffered decline since it's no longer so
> clear who "I" am, much less who *you* are. When
> making a line, better be double sure
> what you're lining in & what you're lining
> out & which side of the line you're on...(570)

If we see literacy from a Freirean perspective, we need to be on the side of the line that wants to raise our students out of their false consciousness in order for them to make their own meanings and to decide for themselves who they are. Freire posits his literacy theory as follows:

> To acquire literacy is more than to psychologically and mechanically dominate reading and writing techniques. It is to dominate these techniques in terms of consciousness....Acquiring literacy... [involves] an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one's context. (404)

One of the first steps to raising our students' consciousness is for composition teachers to stop insisting on the essay as a natural form of writing capable of serving as a transparent lens into "reality."

It is on the topic of the social and ideological nature of language that progressive rhetoric and composition theorists and the Language poets are in the most agreement. Bernstein proclaims that "there is no natural writing style" (*The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* 43), that all writing is artifice (*Poetics* 30). In their poetics, both Bruce Andrews and Lyn Hejinian agree

that we must examine the materiality of writing. The following comment by Andrews concerning the "so-called 'progressive lit'" (668) directly parallels Heath's call for a re-examination of the genres we and our students are working in:

> The usual assumptions about unmediated communication, giving 'voice' to 'individual' 'experience,' the transparency of the medium (language), the instrumentalizing of language, pluralism, etc. bedevil this project. But more basically: such conventionally progressive literature fails to self-examine writing & its medium, language. (668-69)

Both rhetoric and composition theorists and the Language poets contend that full consciousness for any writer is further hindered by the various discourse systems and ideologies under which writers are operating. Andrews asserts that "in an era where the reproduction of the social status quo is more and more dependent upon ideology & language (language in ideology & ideology in language), that means that it can't really make claims to comprehend and/or challenge the nature of the social whole..." (669). Bernstein explains Andrew's approach:

> ... Andrews makes obtrusive
> the social & ideological nature & function
> of language habits in which we are
> ordinarily so absorbed as to ignore
> or repress. Rather than absorb
> the reader in the poem, the poem radiates
> out, projectile-like, against
> placid ear, pseudosensitive,
> appropriateness, *politesse*-- "contesting
> the social ground" without abandoning a commitment
> to the social constitution of meaning. (*Poetics* 35)

Like the Language poets, we, as composition teachers, must recognize that any type of writing approach that we suggest our students take will be bound up in any number of competing ideologies. As Berlin puts it, "A rhetoric can never be innocent, can never be a disinterested arbiter of the ideological claims of others because it is always already serving certain ideological claims" (477).

Literacy theorist Richard Lanham reminds us that we have learned from such theorists as Marinetti, Burke, and Derida to approach prose more self-consciously. He argues that we need to take a new look at prose, "And perhaps engender, at long last, a theory of prose style as radical artifice rather than native transparency" (9). With a call for writing as *radical artifice*, we can observe an instance of literacy theorists, literary critics, and the Language poets all using the same vocabulary. In *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*, Marjorie Perloff argues that modern media has commodified a certain type of reading and writing, and as a result the Language poets "...have come to reconceive the 'opening of the field,' as a turn toward *artifice*, toward poetry as making or praxis rather than poetry as impassioned speech, as self-expression" (45). Arguing against the commodification of writing, Perloff values the ways that Language poets use language to deconstruct common images that have been imposed on us by mass media. Since all of the various poets Perloff discusses tend to write poetry that forces their readers to invent new reading

strategies, we can gather that Perloff recognizes value in poetry as a means of waking its audience from the hypnotic state induced by mass media. If our own aim is raising our students' consciousness, why shouldn't we encourage our students to employ similar writing strategies?

I agree with Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, who declares:

> I have invited students to imagine the possibilities for new forms of discourse, new kinds of academic essays. I do this because I believe that writing classes...must employ richer visions of texts and composing processes. If we are to invent a truly pluralistic society, we must envision a socially and politically situated view of language and the creation of texts-- one that takes into account gender, race, class, sexual preference, and a host of issues that are implied by these and other cultural differences. (349)

Following these aims, we must stop presenting the school essay as the be all, end all of meaning making. That does not mean we cannot present it; we just need to present it for what it is: one type of ideologically and socially constructed way of writing that privileges a certain class. That way, the students can choose when they want or need to reproduce it a' ' why it has its limits.

The following quote from Bruce Andrews seems to embody the aims of most of the theories discussed in this paper:

> Rewriting the social body-- as a body to body transaction; to write *into operation* a 'reading body' which is more & more self-avowedly *social*. Lay bare the device, spurn the facts as not self-evident. A V-effect, to combat the obvious; to stand out = to rebel; counter-embodiment, with our "paper bullets of the brain." All this points to a look at language as medium -- in two respects: first, as a sign system; second, as discourse or ideology. ("Poetry as..." 669)

The only way to change the social body is to change the language. The only way for us, as composition teachers, to change the language is to change the genre of the school essay, or at least to expand it. We must refuse to be the gatekeepers of the academy, and we must do that by refusing to accept only the writing that reproduces the dominant discourse. We must share these ideas with our students and with our colleagues. Then and only then can we expand our definitions of literacy. Then and only then will we be able to re-see

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for what it really is: just one more ideologically charged word.

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